

## Civil War Book Review

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Winter 2006

Article 21

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### The Confederate States of America: What Might Have Been

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#### Recommended Citation

Benson, John S. (2006) "The Confederate States of America: What Might Have Been," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 8 : Iss. 1 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol8/iss1/21>

## Review

**Benson, John S.**

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**Ransom, Roger** *The Confederate States of America: What Might Have Been.*  
W.W. Norton & Co., \$25.95 hardcover ISBN 393059677

We All Whistle Dixie

The World of a Split Polity

What if? This is a favorite subject for many civil war buffs. What if Stonewall Jackson had lived and marched with Robert E. Lee to Gettysburg? What if Lee's orders for troop movements were not lost and subsequently retrieved by Union soldiers prior to the battle of Antietam? What if General McClellan had not been so cautious a commander? These questions and more began to be debated around Union and Confederate camp fires. Following the war, former Confederate and Union officers spent much of their time writing about and defending their theories on these issues. The debate spread and is nearly prolific today. The reason being is that there are no concrete answers to these questions. One hundred years from now the debate will continue with no end in sight. We cannot prove what might have happened because too many variables impact the facts, each with their own consequences. We don't know what role Jackson would have played at Gettysburg because we don't know if Lee would have reorganized the army after Chancellorsville had Jackson lived. We don't even know if there would have been a battle after Chancellorsville. Had Jackson lived he might have continued to fight on the night of May 2, 1863, and crushed Fighting Joe Hooker's demoralized force. If the war continued and Lee invaded the north, we don't know what Jackson's position in the march to Pennsylvania would have been. Subsequently we don't know where Jackson's corps would have been placed on the field at Gettysburg. We don't know what orders Jackson would have given, and to whom, whether those orders would have gotten through and been executed, or if Jackson's presence would have even had an impact on Longstreet and his actions or lack thereof. Clearly we cannot change one condition without creating other, unknown scenarios.

With this in mind, one must hold as suspect any book that claims to be able to predict what would have happened. What if books hold nothing more than educated guesses in fictional settings. Roger Ransom, a professor of history and economics at the University of California, Riverside, believes he has determined what the political, economic, and sociological landscape would have been like had the Confederacy gained its independence. His effort is admirable, the story is interesting, but the conclusions fail to resolve any of the what if questions currently debated.

Ransom starts by looking at the cause of the war itself. Ransom, like many, chose the compromise of 1850 as the initial point to apply what he calls counterfactual analysis (also known as what if scenarios) in determining what caused the war itself. True, the compromise of 1850 was an important settlement between slave and non-slave states which were each fighting for majority representation in Washington. But starting at this point ignores the basic sectional divide that had been slowly widening since the American Revolution. By 1850, the North was already fearful of the political strength of the South. Southerners were already upset by northern backed taxes assessed on southerners to pay for northern infrastructure. Ransom notes that, [t]he events of the 1850's had convinced people on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line that the other side could not be trusted . . . This is true, but to acknowledge this fact, without exploring the events prior to 1850 that convinced this sectional mistrust, ignores a major cause of the war itself. The question over slavery did not suddenly erupt in 1850. It started with the first slave ship to America and any true analysis must go that far back if we are to truly play what if? One cannot start the analysis in the middle, change a few factors, and hope that the end result would be different. By 1850 the North and South were too far down the road toward war to hope that successful compromise would solve the slavery issue. Ransom's analysis, while intelligent, is faulty from a timeline perspective.

Recognizing that the war would likely come, Ransom looks next at the war itself to determine how the South might have won. Factors considered are the political landscape, the military, and the northern and southern economy. Ransom queries how much stronger Confederate forces would have been had the Battle of Antietam been less of a disaster, what if General Trimble had taken Culp's Hill at Gettysburg and forced a Union rout, how a rout at Gettysburg would have caused Lincoln to reinstate McClellan as Union commander, and how a stalemate in Virginia with Grant as overall commander and Hancock as Commander of the Army of the Potomac would have cost Lincoln his re-election

and brought a northern peace movement. Ransom raises some interesting questions. Missing are other hotly debated topics such as what would have happened if Stonewall Jackson had been permitted to chase Union troops all of the way to Washington at First Manassas, or what would have happened had General McClellan or Johnston for that matter, been more aggressive at the Seven Days battles?

Ransom must be given credit for his third and arguably most important section of the book; an analysis of what would have happened had the Confederates won independence. Here Ransom looks at recognition of the Southern government as an independent nation, territorial claims by the two countries, the recognition and use of slave property, and the successful future of an agrarian society. Again, much of this is speculation, but the discussion of it alone is rather unique. Most people only want to discuss the war itself. Few question what the final result, weathered by the decades, would have looked like. Here Ransom displays in intriguing wit and rather sharp analysis. Professor James I. Robertson, Jr., author of *Stonewall Jackson: The Man, The Soldier, The Legend*, often lectures on why we study the civil war. Robertson questions his audiences about how America might have been different had so many men not died in the war. Who died that might have become President? What advances in science might have been made? What might the children of those who died at Manassas done or discovered? These are enormous questions. It is only with the analysis provided by Ransom in this final section that makes tragic sense out of the war, puts it into perspective, and allows us to reflect on how this war forever changed the face of a nation.

Ransom correctly notes the realities of the economies involved. The longer the war went on, the less likely it was for the South to win. The northern economy was equipped to withstand a longer contest. It was only the popular support for the war that served as the northern Achilles Heel. Had Ransom concentrated more along this line and coupled it with his successful look at the realities of a confederate victory, his book would have been more plausible. Ransom should have appraised the competing views of Robert E. Lee who believed an immediate victory was necessary, with that of President Davis who believed that independence could only be achieved through a long and costly defensive war. What would the economies have been like had Lee fully accepted Davis' plan or Davis had given Lee the troops Lee believed he needed for a crushing victory? These are the questions that should have been addressed but were left on untouched.

Along the way, Ransom makes a number of minor mistakes. For instance, Ransom continually refers to Confederate General P.G.T. Beauregard as P.T. Beauregard, an omission of an initial that is rarely made. While discussing the Battle of Antietam, Ransom words the battle in such a way as to confuse some readers into believing that the battle was fought on September 16 and not the 17th. Ransom also notes that a possible reason for the ultimate Confederate surrender was that the South was unable to produce the quality of leaders that eventually emerged in the north. This reasoning completely ignores the military talent of the Confederacy at the beginning of the war. It is interesting to note that only as the war progressed and leaders such as Stonewall Jackson, Albert Sydney Johnston, J.E.B. Stuart, A.P. Hill, John Hunt Morgan, and John Pelham became casualties, did northern fortunes turn. Would Grant have been as successful against Lee at the start of the war?

Ransom gives a noble effort. Many will no doubt enjoy his fictional musings on the outcome of the war. But for most, any real enjoyment from this book will be found in the third and pivotal section on the fictionalized future economies. While Ransom does not put any debates to bed, he does make you wonder where we would be today had the confederates won.

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